

Zeese Papanikolas

Writer

Oakland, California

In the Month of Hathor

I am always moved by Cavafi's poem "In the Month of Hathor." The speaker of the poem studies the funeral inscription for a young man named Leucius, who died in the Egyptian month of Hathor at the age of twenty-seven. Many words have been lost or partly effaced on the stone: it records a life that can only be glimpsed through the ruins of time. Cavafi creates a world long past, Mediterranean antiquity, the Hellenistic, or the Byzantine realms, but he creates these worlds only so we may know our own, itself beset by cruel ideologies and imperial ambitions and the vicissitudes of a future we cannot know, a world which we can only really see in fragments. Cavafi's past is our present. Like some Byzantine or Hellenistic city, the electronic world has crowded all of us, Greeks, Jews and Arabs, Persians and Italians, Muslims and Christians into one great global metropolis. What will remain, what we can retrieve from the ruins of memory and time or the shards of the present is the spark of recognition of another, the fragment telling of the death of a much loved Alexandrian who died in the month of Hathor, a beautiful young man observed in a poor shop, a moment of beauty or tenderness or erotic joy in the midst of civilizations collapsing in upon themselves.